

Baccalaureate 2011

The Need for Wrong Answers

By President Ronald D. Liebowitz

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As some of you may know, but many more probably do not, the Baccalaureate address, going back to its roots more than 500 years ago, was to be the final sermon, a religious address, to the graduating class. It originated at Oxford in 1432, and its sermons were invariably Christian. The president of the college or university usually gave this address; however, given my own religious background, and the fact that I am one of only four of the College's 16 presidents not to have been an ordained minister, it would be quite a challenge to retain the full tradition of the Baccalaureate address.

I should also note that, according to historical records, Baccalaureate speeches are often intermixed with musical performances, drama, and worship, and the main address can range in length from under 10 minutes to as long as four hours. Have no fear again! Though we have been graced today by our wonderful College choir, I am far more likely by disposition to present a shorter rather than longer speech, and that will certainly be the case today.

As you can tell by now, I will adhere to tradition only to the extent that I view this opportunity . . . really this honor . . . to address you for the final time as a class before you graduate.

Although this is by no means a religious address, the core of my message comes from the Talmud, the 2,000-year-old collection of rabbinic writings on Jewish law and tradition. In fact, the Talmud is much more than a collection of writings. According to Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, one of today's foremost living Talmudic commentators and translators, "The Talmud is . . . a conglomerate of law, legend, and philosophy, a blend of unique logic and shrewd pragmatism, of history and science, anecdotes and humor. Although its main objective is to interpret and comment on a book of law, it is, simultaneously, a work of art that goes beyond legislation and its practical application."

The Talmud continues to guide many Jewish communities around the world in their Jewish practice. The particular story I am about to tell and which forms the basis of my message to the graduating class has appeared, unsourced, in several books on Jewish thought. This particular version appears in Sheldon Oberman's *Solomon and the Ant and Other Jewish Folktales*. And the story goes like this:

A young man found a scholar who was a master of the Talmud. The young man asked, "Will you teach me the Talmud?"

The scholar answered, "It won't do you any good."

"Why not?" asked the young man.

The scholar said, "First you need to know the Talmud's way of thinking."

"Fine!" said the young man. "Then teach me the Talmud's way of thinking."

"That won't do you any good, either," said the scholar. "Not unless you have the ability to learn the Talmud's way of thinking."

"How will I know if I have the ability?" asked the young man.

The scholar said, "I will test you with three questions."

"Fine," said the young man. "What's the first question?"

The scholar said, "Two men climb down a filthy soot-filled chimney. One comes out with a dirty face, one with a clean face. Who decides to wash his face?"

The young man answered, "The one with the dirty face."

"No," said the scholar. "It's the one with the clean face. Let me explain. The one with the dirty face sees his friend's clean face. He assumes his own face must also be clean. So he decides not to wash. The one with the clean face sees his friend's dirty face, and he thinks, 'My face must also be dirty.' So naturally he washes."

The young man looked embarrassed. "I didn't think about it that way. What's the second question?"

"Two men climb down a filthy soot-filled chimney. One comes out with a dirty face, one with a clean face. Who decides to wash his face?"

The young man laughed and said, "I already know the answer. It's the one with the clean face."

"No," said the scholar, "it's the one with the dirty face. Let me explain. The one with the dirty face sees his friend's clean face. He says to his friend, 'Your face is so clean! Is my face also that clean?' His friend answers, 'No, your face is filthy.' So naturally he

washes.”

The young man looked upset. “I thought the first answer was the right one.”

The scholar said, “The first answer was right until you think of the second answer. The second answer is such a better answer that the first answer is no longer acceptable.”

“I see your point,” said the young man. “What’s the third question?”

“Two men climb down a filthy soot-filled chimney. One comes out with a dirty face, one with a clean face. Who decides to wash his face?”

The young man frowned. “You won’t get me this time,” he said. “It won’t be the one with the dirty face, and it won’t be the one with the clean face. The answer has to be either both of them or neither of them.”

“No,” said the scholar. “There is no answer because the question is ridiculous. How can two men climb down a filthy soot-filled chimney and one come out clean and one come out dirty? It’s not reasonable.”

The young man looked shocked. “I was wrong all three times. I must be the wrong person to learn the Talmud.”

“No,” said the scholar. “You are the right person to learn the Talmud. Let me explain. If you could answer everything correctly, why would you need me to teach you? You will be an excellent student. Look how much you have already learned about the Talmud’s way of thinking!”

The scholar accepted the young man, and he became an excellent student of the Talmud.

There is a lot going on in this story.

The first time the scholar asks the question, “Who decides to wash his face?” the young man responds, “The one with the dirty face.” The scholar tells the young man he is wrong and explains why. The young man is embarrassed and says, “I didn’t think about it that way.” The way the young man *did* think about it was from his own perspective, from looking in at the situation rather than from the perspective of the two men in the story.

When the scholar repeats the same question, “Who decides to wash his face?” the young man laughs and replies quite confidently, “I already know the answer. It’s the one with the clean face.” When the scholar tells him he is wrong again, and provides the logic to why his answer is incorrect, the young man is upset and says, “I thought the first answer was the right one.”

In this part of the tale, the young man learns there is a very important possibility within the situation that he had not considered—that the two men could talk to each other. When the man with the dirty face notices the man with the clean face, he asks whether his face is also clean. His friend answers, “No, your face is filthy.” So naturally he washes.

When the scholar asks for the third time, “Who decides to wash his face?” the young man, all the more intent on getting the right answer this time, desperately says it must be “either both” or “neither of them.” And for the third time, the scholar tells the young man he is wrong. The scholar points out that the analytical option the young man had not considered is to question fundamental principles even to the point of rendering an entire scenario null and void.

As a whole, this story offers seemingly simple shifts in perspective and reasoning. At the same time, the combined impact of those shifts is great. We discover how much one can learn from wrong answers, and why wrong answers are so central to learning: they force one to delve more deeply, consider new angles, to think in new ways.

We hope your four years at Middlebury have prepared you well to get many answers right, but also to find the kernels of truth in your wrong answers, even if you discover their truths long after the fact.

As this story and the Talmud teaches us, even the “ah-ha I’ve got it” moments can give way to the “wait, there is more to this than I thought” situations. Answers once considered right often become wrong, or at least only partially right, when considered from a larger or more informed perspective. That richer perspective comes from a persistent consideration of the insights that are illuminated by mistakes. In other words, by making the most of our wrong answers, we can become wiser and come closer to the truth.

Although the young man gets all the questions wrong, the process of understanding why his answers were wrong offers an invaluable element of learning. The scholar guided the young man through a relentless exploration of possibilities and perspectives.

It is the young man’s willingness to take part in this exercise, ensured by his very wrongness, that convinces the scholar to take the young man on as his student.

Commencement, of course, means “the beginning” of something, not the end. As you leave Middlebury for the next exciting and challenging chapter of your lives, let our Commencement ceremony tomorrow signal the beginning of adopting a new way of thinking, unencumbered by the fear of getting things wrong, and being fully cognizant of how questions can have multiple answers, and how each answer, either right or wrong, carries with it some truth that advances one’s learning.

Good luck, members of the Class of 2011. I suspect that each of you has gotten enough right answers over the past four years to know how to value wrong answers. We look forward to following your progress, celebrating your successes, welcoming you back to campus often, and encouraging you at your reunions every five years *always* to pursue a special way of thinking.

Thank you.

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